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Published in:
Media Practice and Education

DOI:
[10.1080/25741136.2018.1529477](https://doi.org/10.1080/25741136.2018.1529477)

E-pub ahead of print: 24/01/2019

Document Version
Peer reviewed version

[Link to publication on the UWS Academic Portal](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Higgins, N., & Cole, A. (2019). From doctoral project to cinematic release: a dialogue on the impact pathway of Colours of the Alphabet. *Media Practice and Education*, 19(3), [R JMP 1529477].
<https://doi.org/10.1080/25741136.2018.1529477>

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FRN: From Doctoral Project to Cinematic Release: A dialogue on the impact pathway of *Colours of the Alphabet*

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Since its inception the practice-based PhD has had as its point of reference the traditional text based PhD. Whilst methodologies may differ, and the exact division and relationship between the written element and the practice output continues to vary between institutions, in the case of lens-based documentary practice at least, the film output has the potential to reach and impact upon audiences outside the academy in a way that traditional text-based doctorates rarely do.

The dialogue below explores this ‘second public life’ of the practice-based doctoral output and in particular, the transition from a doctoral project to a more explicitly public facing and collaborative project. This transition forms the basis of the discussion between Professor Nick Higgins, the supervisor and latterly the producer of the documentary, *Colours of the Alphabet* and Dr. Alastair Cole, the doctoral candidate and director of *Colours of the Alphabet*.

Keywords: research impact, collaborative practice; practice based PhD; film distribution; audience engagement; documentary film practice

Introduction:

The PhD programme in Trans-disciplinary Documentary Film was founded by Dr. Nick Higgins at the University of Edinburgh in 2009. The programme was created to allow candidates to pursue any intellectual question from any discipline to be researched through the practice of creative documentary filmmaking.¹

¹ The lead supervisor on all projects was Dr. Nick Higgins, at that time a Senior Lecturer in Visual and Cultural Studies within the School of Languages, Literatures and Cultures and programme director of the Masters in Cultural Studies. Second supervisors were drawn from across subject areas within the school and more broadly across the university, with supervisory boards created with colleagues open to the deployment of a lens-based practice methodology including in the disciplines of Theology, Geography, Anthropology, Middle Eastern Studies and Law.

Alastair Cole first registered for the Trans-disciplinary Documentary Film PhD in 2010 and was supervised by Nick Higgins and second supervised by Magnus Course from the department of Social Anthropology. Alastair's doctoral research question focused on the nature and impact of the language ideologies in multilingual communities in Zambia. Fieldwork and filming for the doctorate was undertaken between 2011-12 and the editing and writing-up period from 2012-14.

Once Alastair had completed his PhD, Nick and Alastair agreed to collaborate on a new version of the film that would increase its chances of achieving domestic and international impact.² The following dialogue between the two reflects on this process.

From Single Author to Professional Collaboration

Nick: So I think it is worth saying at the beginning, that the conception of a lens-based practice PhD is premised on the candidate being able to film, record sound and usually edit themselves. So supervisors are nearly always looking for projects that can be delivered by one person. Sometimes a candidate will work with additional crew members at a later stage; cinematographers, location sound recordists or with editors, but at least at the beginning of a project when candidates are putting forward initial proposals, supervisors are often assessing them with a view as to whether or not the project could be successfully delivered by one person.

So, as we are going to talk about the transition from a PhD to a more public and

² Alastair Cole successfully completed his doctorate at the University of Edinburgh and now holds a Lectureship in Film Practice at Newcastle University. Nick Higgins left the University of Edinburgh in 2013 to take up the role of Director of the Creative Media Academy and chair in Media Practice at the University of the West of Scotland.

industry focused project, it is worth highlighting that the decision making process in selecting a doctoral project is quite different from the thought process about whether and how to become involved in a non-PhD film project that might be successful or ‘travel’ to film festivals.

The central pre-occupation of the PhD supervisor is first and foremost a concern for the intellectual question that is going to be pursued and researched through the practice of documentary filmmaking. It is only once we get to the final stages of a doctoral film being completed that we might start to consider whether the project might have a public or industry focused life beyond being a submission for a doctorate and, it can also be a moment when a more collaborative model comes into play.

The practice-based PhD necessarily needs to be a coherent project in its own right and the written element needs to compliment the practice element, and in your own case, in the final months of the PhD, you had a cut of the film that was entitled, ‘Good Morning, Grade One’. At that point, as you were finishing the writing up, I thought the film and written element combined presented a strong thesis.

So as a PhD submission it was really strong, but at the same time I did feel that there was potentially another edit or alternative version of the film that would allow it to travel. When I say ‘travel’ here, I am not really thinking of an academic audience, I am thinking about film festivals, cinemas and it being viewed in other parts of the world. However, I do also distinctly remember at the same time not wanting to confuse your thinking about the PhD prior to the viva.

I recall that being a particularly tricky period because you were keen for the film to start to have a public life and for the PhD version of the film to be submitted to film festivals and to be screened. Whilst at the same time I was conscious that if that was done then

that would make it very difficult for another version of the film to have a life afterward, and it is to your credit that you had the maturity to navigate those conflicting imperatives.

I don't know what your thoughts are of this time? But I think that was the toughest period because I felt there was a limit to how much could be said so as not to undermine the PhD experience whilst also trying to allow for this second life, as it were, for the film.

Alastair: Looking back, I think the end of the writing up period was so all consuming that it was difficult to find the headspace to consider the public life of the film with much clarity. This was also compounded because, despite my best intentions, while the film was definitely at a fine cut stage, it wasn't the case that it was 100% locked and finished. So whilst I was writing-up, there were still plenty of post-production tweaks happening, which made for its own challenge, before any planning of any release, or potential alternate versions could even be considered.

Once I had submitted the PhD for examination, I definitely felt more able to have these discussions about a possible new version, and it gave me a chance to mentally recalibrate. At that point we were also able to sit down and discuss the nature of a new production team; shifting from a practice based PhD setup of me being a single filmmaker, albeit with significant supervisory support, to the more traditional independent documentary film dynamic of a producer - director filmmaking team, with a wider network of professionals contributing as well.

More significantly, the change required in my own thinking towards the film, as well as to be able to engage with a producer as a creative collaborator, was re-energising, and it did feel like a new start. In my previous short films I worked in co-production with

European production companies, but largely undertook the creative decisions alone.³

However, the huge creative challenges that a feature documentary brings really do emphasise the importance of the collaborative approach that the wider industry relies on, so overall it was a most welcome shift after the previous period of working on the film and PhD in comparative isolation.⁴

Importantly, for the progress of the new version of the film, it was also during this period when we went with the project, basically in the form that was submitted for the PhD, to the European Documentary Network's Twelve For the Future rough cut programme.⁵

Nick: It might be helpful if I provide some context to this development. During this period I had a documentary practice-based research project, *We Are Northern Lights*, that was invited to screen the film at the Helsinki Documentary Film Festival, Docpoint

³ Alastair Cole's two previous short documentary films prior to *Colours of the Alphabet* were *Do You Really Love Me?* (2011) and *Pikku-Kale?* (2012). Both premiered at Cannes Critics Week, and were made with the financial support of Media Europe in co-production with Nisi Masa France.

⁴ It is worth noting that in many practice-based PhDs, the supervisor role is in fact very close to the producer or executive producer role and it is not uncommon for PhD films to credit the supervisors as such. The doctoral candidate, nevertheless, ultimately has to defend their project as 'an original contribution to research' and the relationship at the point of submission is quite distinct from a producer and director relationship, in so far as the doctoral film must be able to be defended without necessarily having to be 'successful' in industry terms.

⁵ DocPoint is Finland's major documentary film festival, held in Helsinki annually in late January. (<https://docpointfestival.fi>) Twelve for the Future is a European Documentary Network supported feature documentary development workshop, principally for Nordic directors and producers but with a history of welcoming Scottish filmmakers.

in Finland.⁶

It was also during this time that I was the University of the West of Scotland's lead on a European INTERREG project, Honeycomb: Creative Works.⁷ Given that I was attending the Docpoint Festival, I began to explore the possibility of taking a small Honeycomb delegation to the industry section at the festival and it was during the planning for this trip that I contacted the European Documentary Network (EDN) to secure observer status for our delegation to their Twelve for the Future project development sessions.

One of the novelties of the Twelve for the Future programme was that the Helsinki session was a rough cut feedback workshop where-in participants would receive feedback from an editor, a producer, a festival programmer and a sales agent. By sheer luck one of the participants had withdrawn from the workshop and so I proposed that we screen the PhD cut of *Good Morning, Grade One* to the panel. Fortunately, the EDN agreed to this and as a consequence we received feedback not only from the panel but a one-to-one consultancy with the editor Nils Pagh Andersen.⁸

It was a great opportunity for us to review the PhD film through the eyes of international film professionals and especially to receive feedback from an editor with

⁶ *We Are Northern Lights* was a mass participation crowd-sourced documentary film directed and produced by Nick Higgins, and co-directed by 121 Scottish participants, whose footage contributed to the final film. In addition to festival screenings, the film was released in all Cineworld cinemas in Scotland in 2014. For more information see www.wearenorthernlights.com

⁷ The EU Honeycomb project was concerned with developing digital skills throughout the west coast of Scotland and Northern Ireland and there were funds available to take practitioners from these areas to international events. For more details see <http://thehoneycomb.net/>

⁸ For more details on Nils Pagh Andersen's films see: <http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0026226/>

an Oscar nominated film.⁹ In retrospect, the event proved to be an immensely helpful way of transitioning from the single author supervised PhD film to a more collaborative reimagining of the film within a professional context.

Fresh Eyes and Collaborative Practice

Alastair: So this was the beginning of the process of reworking the film, however, it created an unusual situation in that I then returned to defend the PhD cut of the film in the viva knowing that the film was now going to change considerably.

The viva went well, and there was a stimulating conversation around the project, but I also knew that it marked a full stop on that version of the film. And as you said, it really came back to this session with Nils Pagh Andersen in Helsinki, where we sat down and he took the film apart in a constructive way that helped me to accept, and welcome, the possibility of a new version.

Nick: I think it is worth clarifying at this point that the PhD film had as a central character the school teacher, Annie, and that cut in many ways followed the well established structure of a single character driven documentary.

Whilst Annie was a good character, I had always felt that she wasn't sufficiently developed and that we didn't have sufficient footage of her to carry the whole film and that by focusing on her there was always the danger that the film slightly obscured the children's experience of the process of linguistic acculturation that had been captured.¹⁰ However, to be able to try out an alternative cut at that point was next to impossible and

⁹ Nils Pagh Andersen's projects *The Act of Killing* and *Human Flow* were both nominated for Oscars in 2014 and 2018 respectively.

¹⁰ Annie's husband had refused to allow filming with him or in the family home in Lusaka.

I certainly wasn't going to insist on it unless you came round to agreeing on pursuing an alternative approach yourself.

So it was very helpful when Nils Pagh Andersen very quickly asked the tough questions about whose story it was? and from whose perspective we should see the world from? When he said that for him the answer was that it was about the children's perspective, and when he suggested dropping Annie, that was a confirmation for me and I think for you also, that an alternative cut without the central character was something worth investigating.

Alastair: Definitely, and as the director, when I look back, there was a dilemma for me and my relationship with the lead character bleeding into the film.

I spent a year filming with her and so we had a strong friendship. She was, however, also potentially a very tricky character to represent, as I felt that she could be misunderstood very easily. Which was a result of both her being a young urban woman in a rural village and also her pedagogical approach. How she taught in the classroom, and interacted with the students was culturally specific, and so I felt that international audiences could potentially view her critically.

As a young director, making my first feature length film, there was also an element of getting caught up with the perceived importance of having a single character-led narrative structure to the film. So the process was a great learning curve for me.

Nick: It could have been a different kind of editor, but Nils Pagh Andersen is renown for exploring editing as an art form and trying to edit films in different ways. And what was really good about his feedback from an industry perspective, and this is me wearing my producer hat rather than my PhD supervisor hat, was that I felt emboldened to

approach the funders and demonstrate this industry buy-in.¹¹

Obviously, being selected for any of the European workshops already represents a level of industry peer review, and being selected for Twelve for the Future and receiving Nils input, meant we could demonstrate to Creative Scotland that the film had potential and they were then willing to provide funds to support a professional editor coming on to the project.

So on our return from Helsinki I approached the feature editor, Colin Monie, who had edited the *We Are Northern Lights* feature documentary that I had directed and produced the previous year. Colin is a very experienced editor who commands top industry rates. However, we had returned with very clear edit instructions and so whilst he was coming late to the project, I could be very clear about what we wanted him to do.

From my producers perspective, this was an ideal situation because I trusted Colin and knew him to be a good professional collaborator who could become involved in a way that the PhD process does not allow for.

Alastair: Yes, there's no way it could have happened within the PhD.

Which I think is not necessarily a bad thing, as I think otherwise it would be just making a film, rather than doing a PhD, which needs to demonstrate an individual's approach to research.

Perhaps this situation reveals the limits of the practice-based PhD structure, and that because there are these constraints in terms of professional collaborations, it may not

¹¹ The film received financial support from the Creative Scotland Film and TV Development Fund.

always result in the best possible film from a PhD project. Nevertheless, the structure developed my filmmaking in the best, broadest way possible, and developed my editing, storytelling and practice based research skills significantly.

So for me, working in the editing room for six weeks with a professional editor was incredibly valuable. Whilst we didn't take the film totally to pieces, we were aiming to significantly change the perspective of the film, from the teacher to the children. This included stripping Annie, the teacher, out completely, and then only re-introducing her when needed. So overall, it was a big shift.

This was essentially a move from one character's story to exploring that of three children and it was something we were not entirely sure was even possible. However, it was a suggestion from Nils whom had felt that the three children; Steward, M'barak, and Elizabeth, who had been sub-characters before, could in fact, in-and-of themselves carry the film.

Nick: Yes, so that became the key question, could we isolate three of the children to be characters in their own right?

Alastair: Also an interesting thing happened during this process. In the PhD version there was a relatively small amount of footage of the parents being interviewed about their thoughts on their children's education, and the value of English, and their own language. It was really content that I filmed more for the wider context of supporting my ethnographic study of the community.

I knew this material well, and had transcribed the interviews as it had informed a lot of my writing, but because I was committed to the single character driven film, I hadn't originally seen the value of it for the final film.

However, Neils Pagh Andersen saw some of this footage and he and Nick suggested I return and reconsider it. I then sat down with the editor to review all of this material to see if the film could perhaps be carried by not only the three pupils, but also by their parents as well.

Nick: Yes, that was an important new element. For me, the voice of the parents became the universal within the story. Being a parent of children the same age as those in the film, it was also an element I identified with and the question again was whether this element of the parents as something akin to a Greek chorus really could be sustained. Fortunately for us, you shot this material well enough and recorded it well enough that it wasn't simply a kind of B roll and could take on a structural position in the final film.

Alastair: Haha, yes, I had always intended for it to look good! But it was a rewarding process for me, as it had been a year or so at that stage, since I had really looked at the footage, and to be able to re-examine it required a lot of work as the majority of the film was in Nyanja or Soli and required translation. It also meant I needed to work very closely with the editor as we didn't have time for the him to become familiar with all 100 hours of rushes, so instead I was able to direct him towards material as we went along, which made for a very intense period of re-editing.

Finding the Audience

Nick: During this time also, the film was being pitched and presented to programmers, distributors and sometimes potential broadcasters.¹² From these encounters you start to

¹² The film was presented to potential commissioning editors, distributors and sales agents at Sheffield Doc/Fest, IDFA (Amsterdam), EIFF (Edinburgh), HotDocs (Toronto) and the European Film Market at the Berlin Film Festival.

gain a sense of how industry decision makers respond to a film and obviously that is something you would never do with a PhD project...

You wouldn't test a PhD film out in the market place, you test it purely on its intellectual merits so that's a very different dynamic. Of course, the new version of the film was pretty much complete by this point and the question was really how do we present it to the world? How do we position it? And how might we find our audience?

All of which might also be seen as important questions for academia as these are all the questions we care about in terms of research impact but, in this instance, what we were doing was employing the strategies of the independent film sector to the positioning of a practice-based research project.

Alastair: And there is no real space within a practice based PhD to consider this.

Nick: Yes, certainly I don't think there is the head space for the student, for the supervisor possibly, but even then, I think there is a potential conflict of interest as the doctoral candidate must be able to defend the film on their own with reference to academic debates. So in one sense, the first audience is always the academic examiners.

The other aspect to note here, is that generally these are all separate jobs in the film industry; distributors, sales agents, marketeers etc. and they constitute a separate form of industrial practice in their own right.¹³ So this was akin to a second phase of practice based research as we pursued an audience for the new market-facing version of the film.

The First Public Impact

Nick: The key task then, became to find a festival slot for the film launch.

¹³ This is the subject of a PhD submission by Fritz Kohl at the University of Edinburgh (2017).

The Glasgow Film Festival has this reputation of having this great public, more so than Edinburgh, and for that reason and the timing of the festival in February it was attractive to us as a launch for the film's premier.

Securing a festival premiere, of course, is also one of the key indicators for funders to be convinced that a film is definitely going to reach an audience.

Alastair: The festival not only gave us a deadline to complete the film, but also the first opportunity for us to start to imagine our audience. First though, we had to get all the final elements of post production locked in, including the grade and sound mix and then during that period we were testing the film on selected audiences including students from the University of the West of Scotland.¹⁴

Nick: The producer of marketing and distribution came on board literally a week before we premiered at the Glasgow Film Festival so we hadn't spent a significant amount of time strategising about how to find our audience. We were therefore delighted that even without a well-developed strategy we managed to sell out our Glasgow screenings and were even moved from a smaller screen into a bigger cinema.¹⁵

What we learned from these first two public screenings was that the film was of most interest to women. Women, generally over the age of 30 or 40, perhaps with experiences in their own childhood of not being taught in their mother tongue or moving to live in a foreign country.

¹⁴ Post-production was financially supported by Creative Scotland.

¹⁵ The film was launched at the festival to coincide with UNESCO's International Mother Language Day held on the 21st of February each year. To read more about the festivals inclusive approach see:

<https://www.screendaily.com/features/glasgow-film-festival-director-we-want-to-be-the-opposite-of-elitist-festivals/5127040.article>

Alastair: And also teachers, and anyone with a link to education and languages, and of course those with children themselves. We learned all this from posing five or six simple questions on a feedback form that all audiences members completed. This was created in collaboration with the producer of marketing and distribution (PMD), who, as you mentioned, had just started on the project at that time.¹⁶

It is also worth noting that we didn't market the film as an African film at all. We discussed this at length prior to the screening, including with the Glasgow Film Festival programmers, and decided on marketing it as a film about childhood and language first and foremost.

Nick: I do remember, and I'm sure you will remember this also, quite a few of the questions in the Q&A were coming from people that were Chinese, or Polish, or people of different ethnicities who were living in Scotland or had even been born in Scotland but had perhaps been brought up in bi or multi-lingual households. These audience members identified strongly and emotionally with the themes in the film, and in particular, with the feeling of frustration at not being able to communicate that they saw manifest in the young children in the film.

This was one of the most gratifying aspects of the premiere; that the audience was genuinely moved and affected by the film. It seems obvious but sometimes after long editing processes I think it is really easy to stop being affected by your own work.

Alastair: Absolutely, and it brings it back to the importance of our collaboration with an editor who was very experienced with both documentary and fiction, and who understood storytelling and the emotional journeys of audiences so well.

¹⁶ The producer of marketing and distribution (PMD) for the project was Ged Fitzsimmons.

And also, as it had been such a long project, and we had effectively edited another version of the film, I had become a little detached from the initial emotional reaction that was possible with the material.

Nick: So that was certainly pleasing and affirming that our film was doing exactly what cinema is meant to do; taking people on a journey, moving them emotionally, making them laugh and cry and, at the end of the screening, creating the space for the audience to talk about their own experiences. Which for me, is a big part of the point of the public engagement possible through practice-based research. It is perhaps *the* best way to start a conversation about issues that are often difficult for people to talk about.

So those screenings gave us renewed energy to then continue with what was the next stage of the project; the theatrical tour of the film to 12 cinemas spread across the cities and west coast of Scotland with the support of a PMD.

Domestic Impact & Distribution Strategies

Nick: The first task was to face the reality of how we might attract audiences into the cinema to see a film about children in Africa. Our response was to begin reflecting on who might be appropriate cultural figures whom might be willing to help us introduce the film to diverse linguistic communities.

It is worth noting that at this time we were also part of the Make Your Market programme that was run by the Scottish Documentary Institute and a boutique London based film agency who specialise in film distribution.¹⁷ Our participation in this

¹⁷ Make Your Market was a six month project based workshop co-delivered by the Scottish Documentary Institute and We Are Tonic. The programme was designed to develop marketing and distribution strategies of feature film

programme helped us to think through different strategies for engaging audiences and to consider why someone might be a good ambassador for the film.

I recall thinking about the tour launch in Glasgow and wondering who might be the right person to present the film? Given our audience research, we felt it was important that the film was introduced by a women, but initially at least, it was not clear what that person's link to the themes in the film might be? It was not until I began to think about the fact that Glasgow is full of Scots speaking people that it occurred to me that perhaps this was the link. I remembered reading a poem by the then Scots Makar (national Poet), Liz Lochhead, about her childhood experience of going to school and discovering that the Scots language spoken at home was not considered 'acceptable language' at school.¹⁸ Suddenly, this opened up the possibility that we could say, 'look this experience in Africa is not very different to the experience of being brought up in Glasgow.'¹⁹

Alastair: To be honest, I hadn't considered that context as an obvious one for the film's link to Scottish audiences. The first thought was the Gaelic or migrant educational experience. Of course, it made total sense, and in fact it was the guest Glaswegian speakers, the Scots Speakers, the Doric speakers and their experience of education that gave us some of the strongest introductions to local audiences.

projects at various stages of production, alongside training new PMDs. See

<https://www.scottishdocinstitute.com/opportunities/make-your-market/>

¹⁸ Liz Lochhead is a Scottish poet and was the Scottish Makar, or National Poet, between 2011 and 2016. Her poem *Kidspoe/Bairnsands* was read by the poet at the *Colours of the Alphabet* cinema tour launch night at the Glasgow Film Theatre. See http://www.ayecan.com/read_scots/liz_lochhead.html for the text of the poem.

¹⁹ The cinema release of the film garnered media coverage from Scottish Television, BBC Radio, and newsprint including the Glasgow Herald thanks in large part to Liz Lochhead's involvement.

Following Liz Lochhead's opening introduction, we had local guests at all the tour screenings; be it Doric scholars, writers in Gaelic or Dundonian Scots. I was touring with the PMD around the cinemas and we ensured that at each one of our screenings we had a very distinctive post film discussion; ranging from the challenges in local Scottish education, children's publishing in Doric and Scots, or the historical experiences of the Gaelic communities in Gaelic medium education.²⁰

Nick: I had distributed three films in cinemas in Scotland before, and so we were very conscious that our screenings needed to have this 'added value' as it were, to attract city, rural or island audiences.²¹ So the effort we went to in advance, to find the right interlocutors for each one of these local cinemas, that both had a community of followers and also a genuine reason to relate to the film, was incredibly important and valuable.

Having a curated discussion post screening, not only substantially increases the impact of the film but it also allows the work to be treated as more culturally significant.

Each one of those screenings was therefore an event in itself, and I have to say that the strategy worked. Our cinema occupancy on the tour was on average 70-80%, which is high. Even if we are not playing on massive multiplex screens, I am aware of other

²⁰ Post film discussion guests included: Professor Norman Gillies OBE (Founder of Sabhal Mor Ostaig), Derrick McClure (Author on Scots Language, and Honorary Senior Lecturer, Aberdeen University), Zoe Venditozzi (Author and teacher), Mark Wringe (Gaelic lecturer at Sabhal Mor Ostaig), Lizelle Bischoff (Director of Africa in Motion Film Festival), Roddy Maclean (Gaelic broadcaster & journalist), Tony Breen (Deputy Head Teacher of Portree High School), Dr Ann Frater (Programme Leader Gaelic Lews Castle College), Donald Macleod (Gaelic and Modern Languages, The Nicolson Institute).

²¹ Previous films distributed; A Massacre Foretold (2008), The New Ten Commandments (2009) and We Are Northern Lights (2013).

films that have travelled on this circuit and in terms of finding an audience, even local fiction features struggle to get close to those numbers.

Alastair: I think it was a result of the structure that we had; which was a producer, director and a PMD involved. The PMD was effectively booking the tour and marketing the screenings. Obviously in conversation with us, but they were the key contact for the screenings and without that extra person involved it would have been very difficult to co-ordinate.

Nick: Added to this of course, we had also arranged whenever possible for you to visit schools close to the cinemas and either screen a section of the film or simply talk about the film and its themes.

Alastair: Yes, and that was also in part to reach out to the parents, so the children would take flyers home for their parents. In fact in some locations, the guest speakers were also figures in the local education community. In Stornoway we had head teachers from local Gaelic medium high schools, and on Skye we had guests from the both the Gaelic high school at Portree and the Gaelic medium University Sabhal Mòr Ostaig.

Nick: So this is where the academic and filmmaker/producer aspects really crossed over. We were both looking for the level of engagement at our screenings to be of the best possible quality and to ensure that there was a thoughtful conversation about how the film related to each one of the local communities in each one of the local cinemas we screened at.

Making a Difference Internationally

Nick: So that's already a life for a film. A 'life' in terms of domestic film festival screenings and a domestic theatrical tour, and then the normal extension of this life is to

have international film festival screenings, which our film has also achieved.²² The final aspect of this project, however, which was not in any sense normal, was then to organise a release throughout the whole of Africa.

This unusual step seemed logical as we reflected on who the audience for this film really was, and concluded that the ‘natural’ audience was in Africa because these were the people who were living the reality of linguistic acculturation much more intensely than anyone else.

Alastair: Yes, very soon after the Scottish tour, we had the Zambian premiere. Which was a conscious decision to take the film back there as soon as we could.

I had actually screened the film to the children and community who feature in the film before we had premiered it in Glasgow, but we returned to screen it publicly in Lusaka, because, as you mentioned, it is one thing to screen the film to Scottish and European audiences, but the impact of the conversation could potentially be more significant in Zambia.

The Lusaka International Film Festival hosted the screening, and we were able to turn it into a special event, as I arranged to have the children in the film come in from the village, as well as organising the teacher to attend the screening.

Our screening received Zambian national media attention, which helped alert those involved in education policy of the film. This was a way to start to foster impact beyond the film screenings, and to understand how the film might be useful within the wider

²² The film has received over 30 festival screenings as of early 2018. These include international and regional film festivals, specialist African film festivals, and human rights film festivals. You can see a complete list at <http://coloursofthealphabet.com/screenings>

conversation about mother-tongue education policy that is happening in Zambia.

Following this, we had a cinema release in a chain of cinemas in Zambia. But importantly, from this we were able to start to understand who the African audiences were, and also how we might be able to reach them. It became clear that it was through online channels, driven through social media activity, that we were able to find our audience and extend the conversation.

Nick: We were also very fortunate that a relatively new initiative had started at that time which was AfriDocs, which is a documentary distribution network across the whole of Africa started by Don Edkins founder of the Steps Project and Foundation.²³ This was a fantastic development for us because somebody had done all the hard work of establishing a distribution platform across the whole continent.

Whether or not AfriDocs would select our film to screen quickly became the primary question but simultaneously we also looked to raise funds so the film could be translated into different African languages. With 54 countries in Africa we wondered whether it might be possible to create a different indigenous language version of the film for each country. We submitted this ambitious proposal to funders such as Britdoc and the Bertha Connect fund.

Whilst we weren't initially successful we did receive very positive feedback from these funders and, most importantly, the support of AfriDocs for our African impact project. We therefore took encouragement from this and set ourselves another challenge, as once we decided to translate the film, it became obvious that we might have to educate

²³ AfriDocs is an Africa wide broadcast and online platform that aims to bring the best of African and International documentary films to African audiences. You can see more at <https://afridocs.net>

translators to subtitle the film, as there wasn't an existing continent-wide network of African film translators to work with.

Alastair: It was a situation where the questions we need to ask ourselves in academia, actually also became very valuable for thinking through how to take the film to audiences in a relevant way. Questions around impact, engagement and sustainability that academia often asks, started to be answered by doing much more than just subtitling the film.

We therefore began to make a plan to train 27 indigenous African language speakers in the skills of translation and subtitling. We came up with a project where that could happen, and brought together a team of translation studies colleagues and industry partners, including subtitling professionals and most importantly, Amara, one of the biggest subtitling software platforms in the world to supply the online infrastructure.²⁴

Together we developed training materials and created a plan whereby the participants would complete a one month free online workshop, and on completion they would be qualified to undertake the paid job to subtitle our film into their own indigenous language and be part of our newly created Africa Film Translation Network.²⁵

Nick: This whole African impact project has really only been possible because of the world wide web, or more precisely because of people building online platforms and

²⁴ The impact project was created and undertaken as a collaboration between Newcastle University and the University of the West of Scotland. The subtitling workshops were led by Dr Lee Williamson. The project also benefited from professional partnerships with the online subtitling software Amara platform and the subtitling company Screen Languages.

²⁵ The impact project was financially supported through an ESRC Impact Accelerator grant and a Newcastle University School Strategic Research Grant with in kind support from the University of the West of Scotland.

online infrastructures that allow us to work and collaborate with people in the continent of Africa, an activity that in the past would have been completely impossible.²⁶

Alastair: In the end it was the ESRC impact accelerator programme that supported the project and the budget was in fact very low considering the impact and engagement the project has been able to achieve. This was only possible of course, because we as academics could contribute our research time towards the project. Within a commercial setup, such activity would require the payment of impact producers. The project management of this impact, considering there were 54 translators and proof readers involved, became a significant undertaking for us. Arguably, academia also provides us the networks and structures to call upon to help support such a project in addition to our research time.

Nick: As a strategy, having a legacy beyond the life of the film is a really positive outcome. To be able to create work and potential livelihoods and to effectively hand over a translation network that other filmmakers can employ is something a commercial operation would not bother with, as it doesn't make any financial sense.

Combined with our focus on the quality of post screening discussions, the awareness we built via social media and our partnership with Afridocs to ensure the film was freely available within Africa, I think it is fair to say that our impact campaign has resulted in our practice-based research being fully accessible in a way that is completely in-keeping with what we now expect from public research in the UK.

²⁶ The project also built on the authors' previous impact projects. This included the delivery of 56 filmmaking workshops across Scotland within Nick Higgins's feature film project *We Are Northern Lights*, as well as the creation of the teaching text book *Learning Through Film: Human Rights in Scotland* (Higgins and Cole 2011), based on the feature documentary *The New Ten Commandments* (2008).

Colours of the Alphabet was released on AfriDocs on 21st Feb 2018, 2 years after the Glasgow film festival premiere. This release purposefully coincided with UNESCO's International Mother Language Day, and UNESCO gave social media and local network support to the film, however, perhaps more importantly for our project than the UNESCO endorsement was to ensure a level of audience engagement. To achieve this we created a social media campaign entitled 'My Tongue, My Story' that offered the audience a platform to write about their own experiences of not being educated in their mother tongue. To start this conversation we asked our translators to tell their own stories and relate their own experiences and this is what I think these projects are all about... a way of starting a conversation and, on this occasion, a way of starting a conversation in 27 languages in 54 countries.

It is perhaps worth reflecting, that this is quite a life for a project that started out as a practice-based PhD submission with a fairly loose idea about exploring language ideology within the classroom which then evolved to become a collaborative practice-based research output with distribution across the whole of Africa, an ongoing festival life that followed a domestic theatrical release and now distribution in the USA.²⁷

Word count (5,841) with footnotes (6,858)

²⁷ *Colours of the Alphabet* is distributed by Documentary Educational Resources (DER) in North America.

<http://www.der.org/films/colours-of-the-alphabet.html>